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## **NO GUARANTEE: MORDECAI F. HAM, EVANGELISM AND PROHIBITION MEETINGS IN TEXAS, 1903-1919**

*By Jerry Hopkins*

Prohibition, as part of the progressive movement, involved evangelical Christians in Texas and the South. Professional evangelists were particularly drawn to prohibition, viewing it as a moral crusade to save individuals, the church, and society from destruction. To these evangelists drinking liquor was immoral. For Southern evangelicals prohibition had been a persistent preoccupation. In the South this concern over man's moral depravity, particularly as it was demonstrated in drunkenness, developed into a drive for absolution that found fulfillment in the revivals conducted by such Southern evangelists as Mordecai Fowler Ham.<sup>1</sup>

Mordecai Ham was born in 1877 Allen County, Kentucky, into the family of a Baptist minister. His early years were spent in that rural county attending school, working, and going to church services. His father, Tobias Ham, and his grandfather, Mordecai F. Ham, Sr., were preachers. Ham was educated at Ogden College in Bowling Green and received a D.D. from Bob Jones College which was at that time located in Cleveland, Tennessee. He worked for some time in business in Chicago before entering the ministry and being ordained in 1901. With the exception of two years as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Ham was a full-time evangelist. From Anchorage, a suburb of Louisville, Kentucky, he conducted an extensive ministry of rallies, evangelistic campaigns, and radio programs. His most successful convert was William Franklin ("Billy") Graham, a product of Ham's Charlotte, North Carolina campaign in 1934.<sup>2</sup>

Ham thought that man needed the moral transformation that comes through spiritual regeneration. He obtained an early education on the evils of drink and later attacked alcohol as a manifestation of man's sinfulness. He grieved because his home state was one of the major centers of alcohol manufacturing and distribution, and he hoped that prohibition would eliminate this curse. Ham vigorously opposed liquor as one of many evils that kept man from experiencing a better life, one that contributed to the decline of spirituality and sober living. "To counter this threat," historian James H. Timberlake observed, "Middle-class Protestants once again sought to evangelize the masses, to promote social reform, and to foster temperance." Most evangelical leaders, especially revivalists such as Ham, advocated another great religious revival. An essential part of that sought-after revival was the prohibition of liquor. It was with this mind-set that Ham conducted campaigns involving many denominations and communities across the South. He began coming to Texas in June 1903 when he conducted meetings in Hico, resulting in 150 conversions. After this initial event, he held sixty meetings in Texas between 1903 and 1919 with varied success in winning people to the faith. From the first meeting in 1903 in Hico to his last regular campaign in 1940 in Fort Worth, Ham conducted a

total of seventy-four meetings in Texas that resulted in 60,260 additions to churches, but never complete victory for the prohibition cause. These meetings were typical of many such evangelical crusades immediately before the enactment of national prohibition.<sup>3</sup>

During the period leading up to the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act designed to enforce prohibition, Ham's meetings emphasized the immorality of drunkenness and the evils of saloons. He recommended prohibition to solve the moral and social problem of liquor. Naturally the prohibition movement in Texas aroused the strong opposition of liquor interests. The state had experienced numerous efforts to enact legislation to limit or eliminate liquor. The *Dallas Morning News* raised alarm that the efforts of prohibitionists, particularly those allied with J.B. Gambrell and the Anti-Saloon League of Texas, were divisive and would result in the division of the Democratic Party in the state. The paper was concerned particularly that the selection of Colonel Tom Ball as a candidate in the Democratic Party primary would be a problem. Gambrell, the editor of the *Baptist Standard*, argued

It is strange that as wide awake paper as the Dallas News should fail to know that there has been an organized whiskey party within the Democratic party since the rise of the prohibition movement, and that they act together, with this difference, however, that the Prohibitionists act openly and the others secretly. But who ever knew an election in recent times when the saloons, through their organized agencies, did not have a candidate? We repeat that what the saloon men had done secretly, the Prohibitionists are doing now frankly and openly, and doing it very successfully, we are glad to think.<sup>4</sup>

The *Baptist Standard* printed evangelist Billy Sunday's brief article against saloons entitled "The Blight of Our Age" in which Sunday argued that the saloon was

the sum of all villainies. It is worse than war or pestilence. It is the crime of crimes. It is the parent of crimes, the mother of sins. It is the appalling source of misery, poverty and sorrow. It causes three fourths of the crime and of course is the source of three-fourths of the taxes that support that crime.

He stressed that legalized liquor was wrong and that liquor should be voted out for the sake of society. It helped only the saloonkeepers and the brewers, not the people, he argued. Thus the prohibition struggle would be waged in the hearts and minds of the people, but more explicitly at the ballot box. The moral component of the liquor issue allowed no room for compromise among evangelicals.<sup>5</sup>

The "wets," those who opposed prohibition, looked upon liquor as a legal and political issue rather than a moral dilemma. To counter the moral arguments of the evangelicals, they relied on political and legal arguments to gain support. Prohibitionists never admitted the legitimacy of these arguments; they could not, because their moral view of the issue refused to allow them to accept either compromise or any dispassionate analysis of the problem. Gambrell warned that the anti-prohibitionists would seek to obscure the issue

by openly supporting "local option," because they wanted to keep the liquor flowing where they could, not because they were giving up the fight.<sup>6</sup>

Pro-saloon forces charged that the churches in the Anti-Saloon League and their use of the pulpits violated the church's role in society. Preachers were exploiting their positions by engaging in such political rhetoric. One critic wrote that "a preacher who graduates from the pulpit into politics becomes a menace to good government." Nevertheless, evangelicals supported prohibition almost without exception, and evangelical churches became focal points of a grass-roots national movement against liquor, especially in the South. Despite denominational schisms, doctrinal differences, and periodic conflicts among religious groups, people of various sects joined in their opposition to alcohol. Many evangelicals believed that by supporting prohibition, they were spreading the democratic "principle that no man, body of men, no race of men, can live unto themselves."<sup>7</sup>

While evangelicals believed that prohibition was a manifestation of this moral principle, in political terms it resulted from a combination of forces that led to the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. Neither "a bolt from the blue" nor a localized movement, prohibition had a number of causes. Booker T. Washington saw prohibition in the South as a movement among the masses, one that united conservative ministers and their congregations – mostly women – mobilizing them to oppose saloons and drunkenness. Prohibition legislation resulted from years of work by the National Temperance Society, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the Anti-Saloon League, the Prohibition Party, and others, including churches. In Texas there was a vigorous effort to keep the prohibitionist forces from fragmenting. In 1914, as the Democratic gubernatorial campaign heated up, *Baptist Standard* editor Gambrell warned of a vicious fight. He pleaded with the anti-saloon forces to stay together, to consolidate their efforts to win the campaign for Tom Ball, who was the best option for prohibitionists who wanted to eliminate the saloon and liquor from Texas.<sup>8</sup>

During this period, churches, in particular conservative, evangelical churches, cooperated with each other in attacking the saloon. The Anti-Saloon League brought together various denominational societies to form a cohesive opposition to liquor. The prohibitionists organized city, county, and state groups across Texas to push the election of candidates favoring their cause. With most churches, women's organizations, such as the WCTU, and an umbrella movement such as the Anti-Saloon League of America pushing prohibition, the issue inevitably would be used by professional evangelists who were sensitive to the mood of the times.<sup>9</sup>

Mordecai Ham entered the prohibitionist movement early in his career. From 1907 to 1910 he devoted meetings in Kentucky almost exclusively to promoting, organizing, and battling for local-option victories for prohibition in the state. Ham often preached a rousing message on total abstinence, urging people to "Get on the Waterwagon!" Ham's objective was to evangelize – to win souls to the Christian life as he viewed it, including total abstinence from alcoholic

beverages. In the battle that he fought for salvation, he saw all opposing agencies as enemies. Obviously liquor and the saloon were such obstacles. They kept men out of the kingdom, even drove them to devilish deeds. Liquor, according to Ham and other evangelicals, was anti-Christian and anti-Church.<sup>10</sup>

To mobilize church members to support prohibition, it was necessary to view drink as a moral problem. Even though Ham and fellow evangelicals considered prohibition a moral question, their actions and the support they received from churches and other groups had political ramifications. For example, the Ball-Ferguson campaign in 1914 and the initiatives of the Anti-Saloon League in Texas mobilized the resources of churches, denominational publications such as the *Baptist Standard*, and the revival efforts of evangelists such as Billy Sunday and Mordecai Ham to support prohibition.<sup>11</sup>

In 1914 Ham conducted a campaign in Cameron that resulted in 500 new members for local churches and a remarkable change in the community as a whole. Milam County voted out pool rooms by a majority of two to one. It was proudly noted that the city of Cameron gave "a handsome majority against them." Even the Knights of Pythias Lodge voted out their pool and forty-two tables and all the clubroom paraphernalia. As a result of Ham's meeting, a young men's prayer meeting was started at the courthouse each Sunday with an attendance of some 200 for each meeting. The local paper noted this effort, saying,

The group of young men are refusing to support any man who supports the saloon, or who is not clean in his life. This is a good example to older citizens of our community. The day is passed in Cameron when the booze gang can pull the wool over the eyes of these citizens, and no man can be elected to office who stands for iniquity.<sup>12</sup>

Even though the Anti-Saloon League, the conservative churches, and evangelists such as Ham supported prohibition in the primary election, the anti-prohibition forces won big in Texas. Gambrell confessed as much when he noted in the *Baptist Standard*, "The saloon forces won all along the line. The Senate is anti-prohibition and the House will be close. It is probable that one of the two congressmen-at-large, possibly both, will be prohibitionists." He went on to write that

We do not despair. We are not defeated. Great moral principles may be retarded, but they will triumph ultimately. We must all be true to our convictions and advocate them as persistently as ever.<sup>13</sup>

This certainly was Ham's feeling, even though the defeat was disappointing and disturbing, and he had worked hard in all his Texas meetings to support the Prohibition movement.

During this same time period Ham attacked the Democratic Party in Kentucky for its involvement with the liquor interests. "The Democratic Party of Kentucky has had its ... lesson that it cannot safely league itself with the liquor traffic .... The masses of the party will no longer stand for it." This certainly would have been his position regarding the Democratic Party in Texas as well. Ham's statement regarding the Democratic Party paralleled a remark

by George W. Young of the Anti-Saloon League. Young stated at the League's national convention in Atlantic City in July of 1915 that

If the Democratic Party in which I was born, and for which I contended for many years, has its future dependent upon the continued debauchery of this nation by liquor, the sooner it is buried in the bottom of the sea the better for our country. What I say I mean: I say the same for the Republican, the Progressive, and every other party in this nation.

Such statements, made by ministers who fought for the moral and spiritual welfare of their communities, likely had great political impact.<sup>14</sup>

Based on his view of liquor as a moral problem and on what he thought the Bible taught concerning its use, Ham favored total abstinence. This common position in the South was most acceptable to fundamentalists. Ham's background offers some clues to his zeal for prohibition. The religious convictions that led to his condemnation of alcohol were rooted in his conservative Baptist environment both as a youth and as an adult. Contacts with liquor-industry representatives also shaped his hostility. He accused some of his enemies of being financed by the liquor interests. In some ways prohibition became a personal battle he waged in the name of God, country, and common decency.<sup>15</sup>

Ham disclosed, while holding meetings in San Angelo and in Cameron, that his campaign against the saloons and liquor was tied to a family experience involving his brother, who was a traveling salesman. He related that his brother was admitted to a hospital in California and was on the brink of death. Ham and Annie Laurie, his wife, traveled to California to be with his brother. He indicated that he "made a covenant with God over the prostrate form of my own brother as he lay flickering betwixt life and death on the Pacific coast." He could not speak to his brother, whose condition was so precarious that "the slightest excitement might snap the thread of life." He asked the doctor what was wrong and the doctor replied, "A whiskey heart." Ham told the congregants that he had prayed for eighteen hours "on my knees wrestling with God for the life and the soul of my brother." During this time of wrestling

with God for the life of my brother, I made a solemn covenant with God that if he would spare the boy long enough to have another chance of salvation, I would never cease to fight the drink evil as long as I should live. My precious brother was spared and is today a happy Christian with a bright hope of Heaven, and I am trying to make good my covenant with God who spared him<sup>16</sup>

So Ham was committed to the prohibition initiative.

From 1907 until the adoption of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, Ham's meetings magnified the liquor question. In most of them Ham focused to some extent on saloons and liquor, often spearheading local option elections and efforts to close down saloons. In several of Ham's meetings in Texas there was a strong emphasis on prohibition that was in keeping with the majority of evangelicals who supported eliminating the manufacture and sale of liquor.<sup>17</sup>

While prohibition was an issue that attracted many supporters because of their belief that social ills could be cured by banning liquor, Ham was concerned with reform only as it was related to individual salvation. He believed that as man was redeemed, new life came to him through Christ. Such a religious experience presented the strange mixture of ideas that most evangelists possessed then. They faced the problem of an individualized salvation, but they found themselves engaged in a war against liquor on the basis of the legal transformation of society. Despite this inconsistency, they continued to pursue their goals — liquor eliminated, souls saved, and Christians revived. Preachers such as Ham, Gambrell, and J. Frank Norris insisted that the elimination of liquor and the saloon was essential to a good and stable society. This effort to reform society was not optional in their conception of the saloon and liquor as moral issues.

There were certain reforms that the meetings of Ham may have facilitated or initiated. His influence on the prohibition movement is undeniable based on his work during these early meetings in Kentucky, Tennessee, Kansas, and Texas. The religious decisions made during meetings in Cameron, Palestine, and San Angelo reveal the significance of his preaching and tactics in helping to shape public opinion. Those who pledged themselves to refrain from drinking, dancing, and other social evils illustrated this significance. There was never, however, the guarantee of a permanent cure. One critic of Ham later stated, "An evangelist does not guarantee a permanent cure: he does not indeed guarantee anything." Ham's leadership in the meeting in Palestine provided an important element in the effort to influence people in that area to support Prohibition and the initiative to remove liquor and the saloon from Texas.<sup>18</sup>

Ultimately the collaborative efforts of the Anti-Saloon League, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the churches, and evangelists such as Ham resulted in the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution and the Volstead Act. In Texas between 1903 and 1919 Ham demonstrated the importance of organization in effecting political and social change. Despite his claims that his purpose was not social, his sermons, his church mobilization, his rallies and rhetoric certainly had social and political consequences, particularly in regard to prohibition. Ham may not have been able to "guarantee anything," but he did exert tremendous influence on voters through his emphasis on prohibition during his campaigns. He used the vehicle of evangelistic meetings to rally Christians in support of prohibition. In a similar way, Jerry Falwell and other evangelicals and fundamentalists have more recently sought to bring the public attention to bear on moral issues such as abortion, pornography, alcoholism, and related topics by what they have described as the "moral majority." The aim of such movements is to change society, to move it closer to what evangelicals and fundamentalists see as being righteous and pleasing to God.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>W.J. Cash, *Mind of the South* (New York, 1941), p. 233; James H. Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement, 1900-1912* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963), pp. 4-8, 17-18; William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York, 1959), pp. 393, 397, 402, 411, 437; J. Larry Hood, "Marching to Zion: Christianity and Progressivism in Nelson and Washington Counties, Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 87 (1989), pp. 144-161; Robert H. Wiebe, "The Progressive Years, 1900-1917," in William H. Cartwright and Richard I. Watson, Jr., editors, *The Reinterpretation of American History and Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1973), pp. 425-442; Thomas H. Appleton's study, "Like Banquo's Ghost: The Emergence of the Prohibition Issue in Kentucky Politics" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1981), while it focuses on the years 1906-1908, furnishes insight into the growing strength of the prohibition movement in Kentucky and a model of analysis for other southern states.

<sup>2</sup>Edward F. Ham, *Fifty Years on the Battle Front with Christ: A Biography of Mordecai F. Ham* (Louisville, 1950), pp. 3-15, 102-104, 108, 113, 214; Wayne E. Ward, "Early Revivals and Evangelism Today," Leo T. Crisman, editor, *Baptists in Kentucky, 1776-1976: A Bicentennial Volume* (Middletown, Kentucky, 1975), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>Timberlake, *Prohibition*, pp. 16-17; McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, pp. 439-440; Thomas H. Appleton, Jr., "Prohibition and Politics in Kentucky: The Gubernatorial Campaign and Election of 1915," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 75 (1977): pp. 28-54; Gregory Vickers, "Southern Baptist Women and Social Concerns, 1910-1929," *Baptist History and Heritage* 23 (1988): pp. 3-5; Ham, *Fifty Years*, pp. 291-293. Also see Jeanne Bozzell McCarty, *The Struggle for Sobriety: Protestants and Prohibition in Texas: 1919-1935* (El Paso, 1980), pp. 10-11.

<sup>4</sup>*Baptist Standard*, February 26, 1914, p. 4. For a general history of the Anti-Saloon League of Texas see "Anti-Saloon League of Texas," in *The New Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/AA/vaa2.html>. For a comprehensive analysis of Prohibition in Texas from the 1840s to the 1930s consult the article in *The New Handbook of Texas Online* on this topic.

<sup>5</sup>William A. Sunday, "The Blight of Our Age," *Baptist Standard*, April 23, 1914, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup>Booker T. Washington, "Prohibition and the Negro," *The Outlook*, March 14, 1908, p. 589; *Baptist Standard*, April 23, 1914, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Although this was an observation made by a Kentucky writer, it certainly was a sentiment felt and expressed by others across the South and in Texas particularly. J.W. Sowers, "Political Preachers," *Lexington Herald*, September 27, 1914; "The Saloon in the South," *The Outlook*, March 14, 1908, p. 582.

<sup>8</sup>Frank Foxcroft, "Prohibition in the South," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1908), p. 627; McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism*, pp. 439-440; Herbert w. Schneider, *Religion in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1952), p. 63; Timberlake, *Prohibition*, pp. 125-148; "Ball, Thomas Henry [1859-1944]," "Ferguson, James Edward" in *The New Handbook of Texas Online*.

<sup>9</sup>*San Angelo Weekly Standard*, February 26, 1915, p. 1; April 2, 1915, p. 8; Lewis L. Gould, *Progressives and Prohibitionists: Texas Democrats in the Wilson Era* (Austin, 1992), pp. 120-149.



<sup>10</sup>Jerry B. Hopkins, "Saved and Dry: Kentucky Local Option and Evangelist Mordecai F. Ham, 1907-1910," *The Quarterly Review (SBC)* 41 (1980): pp. 62-79; Jerry B. Hopkins, "Mordecai F. Ham: Prohibition and Sensational Evangelism in Kentucky, 1914-1915" (M.A. Thesis, Eastern Kentucky University, 1969); *Kentucky Advocate* (Danville), November 18, 1915; *Palestine Daily Herald*, May 19, 1914, p. 1; Jerry B. Hopkins, interview with Mrs. Mordecai F. Ham, March 8, 1969, Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>11</sup>R. Morton Darrow, "Techniques of Political Action," *Religious Perspectives in American Culture* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 171, 187; Timberlake, *Prohibition*, pp. 131-132; *Baptist Standard*, April 23, 1914, p. 32; April 30, 1914, p. 8; May 7, 1914, p. 31; June 11, 1914, p. 1; June 18, 1914, p. 4; June 25, 1914, p. 1; June 14, 1914, p. 9; July 16, 1914, p. 24; July 23, 1914, p. 8; August 13, 1914, p. 4; August 20, 1914, p. 1; *Palestine Daily Herald*, June 3, 1914, p. 1; June 12, 1914, p. 3; June 15, 1914, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>*Baptist Standard*, May 7, 1914, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup>*Baptist Standard*, July 30, 1914, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>*Kentucky Advocate*, November 18, 1915; George W. Young, "Saloon Elimination," *Proceedings Sixteenth National Convention of the Anti-Saloon League of America* (Atlantic City, 1915), p. 251.

<sup>15</sup>*Kentucky Advocate*, November 18, 1915; *San Angelo Weekly Standard*, February 5, 1914, pp. 2, 4, 8; February 26, 1915, pp. 1, 2, 8; *Palestine Daily Herald*, May 19, 1914, p. 1; Ham, *Fifty Years*, pp. 95-97, 102, 165-175, 261; Timberlake, *Prohibition*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>16</sup>*The Cameron Herald*, January 22, 1914, p. 2; February 19, 1914, pp. 5, 26; February 26, 1914, p. 2; March 5, 1912, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>J.W. Sowers, "Political Preachers," *Lexington Herald*, September 27, 1914; "The Saloon in the South," *The Outlook*, March 14, 1908, p. 582.

<sup>18</sup>Ham, *Fifty Years*, pp. 37-60, 99-124; *The Cameron Herald*, January 22, 1914, p. 2; February 19, 1914, pp. 5, 26; March 5, 1912, p. 1; Gerald W. Johnson, "Saving Souls," *The American Mercury*, July 1924, p. 365.